



RECLAIM – CRITICAL DESIGN AND PUNK GAMIFICATION IN THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

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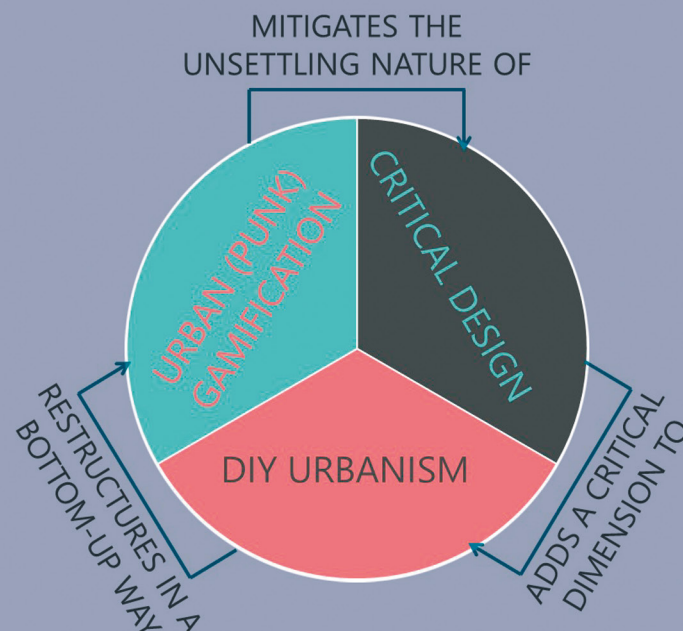
ABSTRACT

ReClaim is a MSCA-IF research project aiming to build a concrete and methodologically sound framework on how to use playfulness and games to make cities more liveable and inclusive and to empower citizens to reappropriate urban spaces.

KEYWORDS

Urban gamification; Punk; Critical design; DIY urbanism; Pervasive play.

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CONTEXT

Play has always had its place in the city. Many playful phenomena use the urban spaces as their playground: from simple games like “don’t walk on the pavement lines” to traditional practices such as the carnival, to street sports, to contemporary location-based games such as Pokémon Go. Today, however, city-play is acquiring a new, important dimension: it is seen, more and more, as an antidote to the anonymity of the urban environment [1], as a counterbalance to the technocratic approach to smart cities (transforming them in Playable Cities [2]) or as a tool to promote prosocial and sustainable behaviours (The Fun Theory).

TARGETED ISSUE

City residents feel increasingly powerless and disconnected in face of the changes brought by globalisation [3] and by the ICT revolution [4]. This is even more critical to vulnerable populations, in a moment where the right to the city of lower classes, minorities and immigrants is often questioned.

As urbanization progresses quickly (since 1999 more than half of the population lives in cities, and in Europe around 75% of the population lives in urban areas) innovative, sustainable and efficient solutions are direly needed.

The success of urban AR games such as Pokémon Go, together with the ongoing ludicisation of culture, suggests that play could be a possible solution to these issues.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

ReClaim outlines a framework for urban gamification articulated around three main arguments:

1. Urban play seems to reinforce the perception of “city ownership”: it is an activity that requires immersion and light-hearted engagement and is able to build communities around shared experiences. Play emerges as a powerful tool capable of promoting senses of ownership, community, and belonging which all contribute to improving urban life and the well-being of citizens.
2. If broken windows theory claims that urban disorder leads to increased crime rates and lower quality of life, city-play – thanks to the links of play with fairness, trust, and sharing – can be a catalyst of positivity, making urban spaces feel more friendly and safe.
3. Urban gamification can (and often does) work also as a political statement. Cities are spaces of semiotic, social and political conflict, with an extreme power imbalance when it comes to the power of writing the city. In the citizens’ fight for the right to the city [5] play appear to be a tool for peaceful but impactful actions in urban areas.

RELEVANT INNOVATION

In order to address these dimensions, a solid approach to the gamification of cities is needed. However, gamification has been accused to be exploitative, and even its more ethical and well-crafted approaches and implementations tend to be top-down and paternalistic.

ReClaim, therefore, proposes a different approach, that of Punk Gamification, linked with tactics such as situationism critical and participative design, DIY urbanism and pervasive play [6]. Punk gamification moves the attention from game elements and rules to the freedom that is afforded to play and its imaginative and make-believe implications. In this way, punk gamification can be used to empower the citizens and offer them tools to reappropriate the public spaces, instead of attempting to manipulate their behaviour or motivations as it is often the case with traditional gamification.

PROJECT OUTCOMES & RESULTS

While the framework elaborated within ReClaim aims to have also an applicative side, it can already be used to understand existing cases of urban gamification. Activities such as pride parades, parkour, flash mobs, Google Street View photobombing or Park(ing) day can be approached from this approach, as they are all playful, bottom-up, critical and used to make strong statements about the use of urban public spaces. On



the other hands, urban games such as Cruel 2 B Kind or Wayfinder Live have similar effects on the urban fabric – enriching it with playfulness and allowing new forms of interaction between citizens – and can be equally understood as forms of urban gamification.

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CONCLUSION

The application of the framework to existing activities of urban gamification and to urban games allows a deeper understanding of these practices outlining. The framework helps shed some light on their context and highlights the common traits between activities that, at a first look, could seem rather different. Lastly, ReClaim has also elaborated a typology of these actions focusing on their most fundamental elements [7].

PERSPECTIVES & NEEDS

The goal or ReClaim is to map the existing actions and approaches to urban gamification in order to build a theoretical framework and a set of guidelines and best practices for future projects.

The next step will be a series of expert interviews that will allow to reinforce the framework with the hands-on experience of organisers of activities related to urban playfulness.

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